

City Wise, or Area Boy Chronicles

Salawu Olajide
March 21, 2024



I know this city. I own this city. I know enough to teach you how to survive here. First: you should know this city will rip your legs apart and *do you* until you scream; I want to be anywhere else but here. The thing is, you'll never leave, and you'll never feel fine anywhere else again. Two: you need to be wise or someone who is not your mate will rub your face on the ground and give you shit to eat.

But today is not for lessons.

It's noon. I am standing at the Bóládé-Oshodi bus stop covered in the dust of passing vehicles, the smell of street food and the screams of a thousand traders in the open market behind me. I take one drag now and then from the *eja* in the Rizla paper tucked between my fingers. I am alive.

I am doing my duty; collecting road dues from bus drivers with some of my boys for the Chairman, who will then remit some to National by the end of the month. Once I sight those Danfo drivers who think they are wise, pressing their accelerators as they approach the bus stop, I scream: "*Were!* Where's my money?" They salute me with their imbecile laugh. I spread my palm at them and curse, "*Your mother! Give me my mother. Or you want to fall and die?*" They stretch out their hands from the bus and hand me *Kishi* sharply. The smile disappears from their face, but it

appears on mine. I crumple the notes and tuck them into the waist bag. One down, more to come.

I return to watching and running the city. I'm alive. I'm pissing water from sachet water on bus conductors in jest, laughing with my boys, dancing to the fuji music booming from the speaker in one of the roadside shops. I kick the air like I'm taking a penalty shot. These legs standing here, kicking bus vendors, also want to play like Ronaldo. In fact, I am looking forward to going to my football practice in the evening. Me—*agba* striker waiting for his time to shine. But for now, my eyes are on the road.

I am shirtless, but my body feels like it's smeared in glue. The heat is like sitting next to a heap of burning coal. I make a mental note to rush down to the public bathroom later in the day and wash the grime off. I'll have to remember to trim the bushy forest under my armpit—*Kai!* —it's beginning to prick me, but I sometimes forget when I'm in the middle of my daily hustling duties. I eye a man screaming into his megaphone that the world will soon fade away. The man is a show of pity. He is shouting himself hoarse as he competes with the surrounding noise—vehicles honking, loud music, screaming, and the many sounds of a city bus stop. The man is not talking to me, but he is looking at me like he wants me to feel like he is talking to me. Bloody never-do-well bastard! Accusing his mother and not me with his eyes. This world can never disappear. Disappear? How? When? How can the world end when my belly is not yet full? When I am yet to play in the Champions league. No *Yawa*, we will continue to do our thing.

I have a city to run. I am the king of the streets.

My boys carve a half-moon in front of buses as the traffic slows, drag down a bus driver and skin him of his day's earnings because he tried to be wise. He is begging us. He is kneeling on the ground in the middle of the road, hands clasped together saying he'd always pay his road tax and not try to be wise. My boys pat him down. They check every pocket he has on him and remove all the notes they find. They count the money he owes from what they get and put the rest of the notes back in his pocket. Maybe one of the boys takes a few more notes than they should, but they don't steal. They know I'll erase anyone who steals. They don't steal—they only take a little more than they should from the bus drivers. The one or two extra notes are a tax for the hassles the driver cost them. We mark the buses of those who pay the road tax with a marker and signal for them to move.

There's a long jam building on the road as we hold down the bus driver. The passengers on the other buses we are yet to check are screaming like we are the ones causing the jam. It is potholes causing traffic and they are accusing us. I think they are mad. They don't know I need to collect what's mine from these Danfo drivers.

One of my boys peers into the bus behind the one we are holding and asks the passengers if they are crazy. Another one of my boys hits the side of the bus with his fist and bounces around like a boxer in the boxing ring. The passengers in the bus duck and I calm my boys with a shake of my hands—like I am bouncing an invisible basketball. *No tension, Wise Boy. No tension.* I ask them to ignore the screaming passengers—any of them that dares to act like Van Damme will collect. When I say they will "collect," the boys know that it means: they will be free to descend multiple slaps on anyone who is acting stupid. It rarely gets to this point. We don't do *vawulence* without a purpose.

Even then, I observe for the passenger who'd get off the bus, perhaps because an ancestor in his head is pushing them to become the people's saviour. *Dem no born dem mama well.*

Some of the passengers are yelling at us "Nonsense, *Agbero* boys!" as if it is an insult. Is there a way anyone describes what you are, and you'd get angry? *Agbero* is who I am. I am a correct Area Boy—Wise Boy for life. An *Agbero* to the core. We harass passengers, help politicians teach those

who don't have sense, sense. We don't steal, but sometimes, we pick pockets. We are the good people, because all the things we do are for the people.

I see another bus and I signal to my boys to let the bus driver go. I run at top speed, like the football striker that I am and thrust the palm of my hand at a conductor who thinks he has escaped me and curse out, "Your *moda!*" at the top of my voice. I gain speed and reach the bus he is on, dragging down the conductor hanging from the door of the bus until he tumbles down to the asphalt road. I rend his cheek with a slap. The driver speeds away, leaving the bastard boy in my hands. My boys arrive at the stop, and he collects beating from them—blast of fists become raining slaps and blows and a few *topsi* smacks at the nape of his neck with the tips of their fingers. No one dares to escape me.

Anyone thinks they are wise or wicked, the city is where they learn to wise up. If you can't be wise in this city, you can't be wise anywhere. I see a man who's got his fatigues on jump down from one of the buses with a horsehide in his hand. He is walking towards me. I start running. I sign to the boys that I'll see them later. You can't catch the wind. You can't catch me.

"Everyone is waiting for the change to happen, even though it's right there before our eyes. Things are changing. The city is disappearing before our eyes," Pamela says. She's chewing gum. All I can think is, *fine woman*. In my head, I am saying, *See her beuriful lips*. My thighs feel like wood and I turn away because I do not want her to see the bulge, and I continue to laugh as if I just lost it. Ki-ki-ki-ka-ka-ka-ka-ka. It is as if the fact that she breathes makes me laugh too. I adjust my trousers, pinch the zipper forward and shift on my seat.

"Are you okay?" she asks. She looks concerned. I smile and then give that mad man laughter again. *I don craze walahi*. The woman can make someone go crazy. See her red, red lips.

I know her type and what they want from younger guys like me. They look for people like me, without any connection to anyone they know. Someone who can service them in incognito mode anytime they need it. I am waiting for her to tell me when and where and we can begin. I am in it for the *Kishi*. She picked me up from Oshodi and drove me to this place in Lekki after saying that Ìyá Kafayat's place by the roadside with its loud fuji music is not a place to make a dream happen.

I return my eyes to her mouth. I'm always amazed by how her mouth shapes like the mouth of a soft drink bottle. When her tongue slips out to lick her lower lip and she then rolls it back, I want to ask her if I can help her.

She has brought me to one of those nice lounges in Lagos again. I'm here because she drove me down here to eat pepper soup in a "relaxed environment" as she calls it. I think the people in the lounge, coming in and going out, can see that I wanted to enter the ground when we first walked in. They all look like they are made from multiple parts, and too clean to be real. I am clean too, this time. I am wearing a white T-shirt. White makes me look very good. The colour is great against my *amala* skin. Still, I feel the people in the bar can tell I am not one of them. I like this place and I don't like it at the same time. Everyone here is acting like they are sucking in their stomachs, or they need to show off stomachs that look like sacrificial gourds. Either way, there's a show-off. I don't think it matters if I like or do not like this place. I am waiting for the time she'll let me know how she wants to help with getting a club abroad. It's the dream of every footballer. My dream is to play for a club abroad.

I lift the glass from the table because we were not talking and I am beginning to get tired of staring

at the full buttocks in skirts made from the length of toffee wraps. None of them would even allow me to come close to them. These people are not like Mulika or her friends in Oshodi who I can just smack their butt and wink. These women will slap me, and I won't be able to say a word back. Only one of them Mulika girls ever slapped me back and I didn't get angry because I like her, even though she said she'd never have anything to do with me.

"*Na wa o,*" I say, as the meat dissolves into my mouth and curses silently. There must be a way they cook goat meat that makes it softer here. I don't know if it's better than the pepper soup woman in Oshodi underbridge, but I like the way the flashes of light, in different colours, tease their way around. It would be easy to do really bad things with a woman here and still be considered decent about it. Bad things are better in a good environment. I think I see Pamela's point now. I see why she brought me here.

Pamela loves to watch me eat and talk. I like to hear her voice, sounds like those birds that chirp at dawn, but there's a hissing rhythm to hers and it's like a DJ ending a song with a scratch. I don't know. I've just never heard anyone talk like her. Maybe it's just that *abroadian* way she talks. Her lips are like—no way, I'm thinking of that again. I focus on her hair. She wears natural hair. These days when every girl wants to wear a wig and natural hair from India. She tints her natural hair with gold. I think to hide the greying. I can tell she's in her late forties, but you'll never know. Looks like a woman frustrated that she reached the thirties mark. But this one in front of me is nearing fifties soon. Uh-oh! *God dey create-o.* See her lips.

She's eating me up with her eyes. I like it and I won't say I like it. "Do you understand all the things I'm saying to you?" she asks. "You need to open your ears and listen."

"Sure," I tell her and down my beer.

She leans forward. "I mean, everyone now and then hears of those people who eat part of the city up. Maybe a public tap here or there, or an uncompleted building tucked beyond the scrutiny of eyes. Some we hear eat the shrubs to keep the city from getting overgrown with grass, but I would not have believed it if I didn't see it with my eyes." She raises her face to level up with mine and whispers, "Have you seen them?"

"Seen what?" I ask, as I am struggling to get the meat stuck between my teeth out. I'm wondering how she is talking, and I am listening, and I can't make sense of what she is saying, because it doesn't make any sense to me.

She takes a deep breath. "Turn around—"

I turn my head left and then right and then back right where I am, interested in finishing my bowl of pepper soup in peace. I mean, what is all this craze? Is it because she brought me to eat a bowl of soup that she wants to drive me crazy?

"I mean turn and look at the people behind you. Pay attention to those with flowing agbada and foreign suits." She uses her eyes to tell me to follow her gaze and I do. She stands up and beckons to me to follow her. I look at my unfinished bowl of pepper soup and two bottles of wine on the table. As she tries to sort out the bill with the waiter, I ask for a take-away bowl and a bag. She has that stony look, but I look away. She relaxes and parts her lips slightly like she knows I like her mouth. She then asks if I'd like her to drop me off anywhere and I shake my head. I prefer to be left behind. That holds more promise.

"I'll send a car to pick you up next Friday."

She slips a roll of naira into my palm, and I pocket it. "Pay attention and take note of what's happening around you. Just know that if they are eating the city, they will eat you too. Soon." She lingers and I was thinking she wants to add something to all she's said, but she leaves. I watch as she leaves. She's not a beautiful woman if you look from behind. She could be any other woman.

I sink into the chair and open the paper bag that the waiter gave me to make me feel like I am like the rest of the people in the lounge. He says, "Sir" as he hands me the bag. I sit straight, square my shoulders, and stiffen my neck the way I see the men in the lounge do when they are coming in, with their noses up like they are trying to sniff out people like me. I am here. I am not smelling today, but I think they know people like me. We smell because we have nothing.

A uniformed guy walks in with two big men and a woman. They are looking straight at me. Every uniform in this country has power. I know it. Just that *power pass power*. These have government power, and I don't want to know if they are police or soldier or whatever, but they have the eyes of those who know they can do and undo with their power. I leave the rest of my goat meat pepper soup on the table. It's time! Time to disappear.

I am eating the life of my head as that local singer once said. Steadily. Steadily, I am eating life.

Back when I was in secondary school, which was when I used to hang out with Area Boys at the bus stop to smoke skunk but had not joined them to start collecting money from bus drivers, there was this coach who handpicked those of us with skills like Drogba and who had a bright future in the game, as he would say. It was so great to have someone believe in me so strongly. It was not like I had never been trained by a coach before—if one considers Uncle Sina the PE master a coach—it was that this one was different. He was a former player in a club in Spain. I believed more than ever I was going to be a star and that my uncle who said I could never amount to anything in my life would come to me for money to save his leaking roof. Bloody nonentity of a man.

I believed I'd play for a club abroad after that time he trained us.

I was always part of the team that represented my school. I still see myself running towards the goalpost at an interstate football match at the Abeokuta stadium. Confident in my borrowed soccer cleats and a leg padded with thick socks, knowing the opponents were at my heels. The local commentator with his dialect eating into his English is praising me like I am Ronaldo. Like Salah, Like Mikel Obi. Like Messi. I mess other players up on the field. I am a star. The man is screaming, and I can hear him calling my name, asking the opponents to hold me before I get to the post. He is saying I am the future. I am one of those they should watch out for when the country goes to the World Cup. The crowd is awake now. Applause. Screaming. Loud banging. School anthem. I feel the noise in my bones as I run, closer and closer to the goalpost. The crowd is fuelling me to run harder. I control the ball and move it from my left leg to the right, so I won't trip. I didn't even know I had run the whole length of the field by the time I was faced with two defenders. I dribble the first man trying to block me from kicking the ball into the net; he slides and falls. The second defender tries to come between my legs. I kick the ball slightly ahead and he tumbles, and the crowd screams—*Aeeeeeeeeeee!* I face the goalkeeper. He has his hands stretched to both sides, and he is bouncing, but I can see how deflated he is and how he is lacking in energy. He is coming towards me, and my leg hits the ball, but not in the way I want it. I slip and only the sound of *Goaaaaaaaaa!*, gets me running toward my team member. We won.

It's night when we come back from Abeokuta and the bus drops us in the school compound. My teammates say goodbye to me as their parents accompany them home. As I don't have a home to go

to, I pray silently for the spirit of my parents to take me safely to wherever those who wander in the night are kept. My uncle had kicked me out of his house a day before and the team was my saving grace. I had assumed we'd sleep in Abeokuta and then I'd have to think about where to sleep when in daylight. I hurry onto the streets. The night has teeth and I feel like something scary will jump out of the dark and eat me up. I walk like the owner of the street—maybe that's the day I began to eat life in the city.

That night I arrived under the bridge, met boys my age rolling fish and maybe they were too high to care that I was not one of them. They offered me a drag. One-ish. Two-ish. Three, and I began to feel something rise from inside of my stomach. I am not there yet. I know I am not where the boys are already, but I see myself doing everything. I eat more fish. Big drag and the boys laugh. I can feel the taste of their laughter.

I spend the rest of the week with the boys and do not return to school. Not sure if I hoped my uncle would come looking for me, but he didn't. I start eating the head of my life with the boys I met under the bridge and that is what I want to do the rest of my life. Eating life.

The next time Pamela sends a car to pick me up I am reeking of *eja* even though I did not smoke with the boys at the bus stop. Still, the previous day's smoke has changed my voice into a mix of Barry White and Pasuma. I have not eaten anything since yesterday. I am floating towards her and almost trip over the table, but I still find the strength to throw both hands in the air and stamp my feet on the ground like a soldier finishing a salute, "*Twale! Mama mi.*" I do not know how else to show her honour, except greet her the way we greet the Chairman of the motor park.

Pamela smiles at me and offer her hands like she wants me to shake her. I hesitate and her hand disappears.

"Hunger wants to kill me," I say with a yawn. She eyes me like she doesn't understand what I am saying. We do not enter the restaurant this time. She wants us to walk to the waterside because she likes to feel the breeze against her body. I earn a few stares, especially from the men in uniforms who pay more than normal attention to my dreads, but I square my shoulders and try to look as important as the men I have seen in this place. You can be empty and still look filled with importance. Barrels without use. I've learnt that from simply watching the men. We stop and sit on a curb directly facing a suya man.

Pamela gives a long sigh and I get the feeling she's finally going to ask me what I know already. I look at those lips of hers again, just as she says, "The flesh-eaters are multiplying and finding new ways to eat the city faster." She lets her words sink into the evening. "Do you understand what this means?"

"We all are doing our best."

She heaves a sigh. "I'm not sure what you think of me, or maybe you think I am crazy."

"I like your company that's all." I don't say anything about having her pick me up in her luxury car at the commercial park in front of the boys makes me feel like a top shot. I am more important and influential with the boys now. They don't grumble when I ask them to do anything. They even think it is someone from National that sends the Benz to pick me every time. Who cares what they think.

My stomach rumbles. I swallow spittle watching the suya man in front of us turn the smoked meat over. She is staring at me, but not at my face and it takes a while for me to see that she is watching

the movement of the spittle pushed up and down my throat. She signals to the suya man and tells him in Hausa, "*Ta yaya kake siyarwa?*"

The man responds to her, waving a skewer at her, and I translate it to mean that he explains what each stick is worth. She makes a peace sign, to indicate two sticks. "*Ka gayawa yaronka ya kawo sanduwa guda biyu.*"

Even now she sees the surprise in my eyes—I'd never have guessed that she speaks Hausa. I assumed she was Yoruba like me. I act like I do not know what is going on, until a broom boy brings the suya wrapped in newspaper to her and she hands him what I believe is more than the money required. The boy shows his happiness with his hands in a fist, *Sanu, sanu, sanu*. I know that one, but I am almost thinking he is never going to stop the thank yous.

Pamela hands the meat over to me. I thank her, although in my head I am thinking of the shape of Eba and Ewedu soup I will order from Iya Sikirat's canteen. The suya tastes good, but it will only make me hungrier. I need solid food. I want something that'd land in my stomach, and I can feel like the foundation of a high-rise building.

As I drop the meat one piece at a time at a time into my mouth without asking why she hasn't order for herself, she looks straight at me. "It's a lost memory, but you won't believe me if I tell you," she says and with a little laugh that makes her voice shake when she begins to talk again, "... I used to be a complete Mushin girl. Born and bred in the moonshine. Mushin Olóshà to be precise. I learnt to speak Hausa there. From friends—like him." She nods her head towards the suya man.

"I don't know too many rich Mushin girls," I say.

She grins and immediately she frowns. Her voice is low as she speaks, and I have to strain to hear her speak.

"They will eat up everything." I lean towards her and feel myself suddenly throwing another piece of meat into my mouth. My hand is hanging midair as I listen to her with rapt attention. "They use people like you all the time. You need to do something. You need to stop them from eating this city to the ground or nothing will remain and then they will turn to us and eat us too. And if we survive—if they eat us and we are dead, but we survive, then we will live as living-deads. Our lives will be meaningless. Do you know what it means to live without life?"

Between my admiration for her lips and how rich she is, sometimes I find myself wondering if she's alright in the head. How can someone live without one's life. I mean, think about it. How can this woman, all of her, approach me, a drop-out and an Area Boy about people who are eating Lagos and then talk like she's unhinged. In what way can anyone eat up or even swallow a whole city? What sense is in that?

I swear on my late parents' graves, I am not crazy, so she has to be the one who is going mad. Yes, I have moved from living under the bridge to sharing a room with seven other boys, because I have come to know the street, but even then. But this woman Pamela has a way of holding you in a trance and you find yourself listening and listening and not wanting to do anything else but watch her glistening red, red lips. So, I humour her.

"What can I do?"

Pamela smiles. She paces and for the first time I follow her eyes and I see the things she is seeing, and I wonder why I never noticed them before now.

"What's the problem?"

I feel the skin of my city and I fall to my knees. I am seeing things I never knew before now. How didn't I know that Lagos had a skin. A damn skin in which it shielded us, and it was now covered in eczema, hives, and ringworm. How did I even ever think I ran this city? This city stretching endlessly with waters side by side, was slowly being eaten all over by infection that was also wounds and bruises the shape of an adult's mouth.

Uncountable wounds and bruises the shape of an adult's mouth were all over the land. Something was devouring this city—my city—which stretched indefinitely with waterways side by side.

"Is this real?" I ask and even I can tell my voice is quiet.

Pamela nods. "If it doesn't exist you won't see what you see."

"I mean, why am I just noticing this?" I know every corner of this city, from the ghetto of Ajegunle to the insane luxury at Banana Island. I know the nooks and crannies of Surulere, know the faces of the newly arrived hugging their bags at Ojodu Berger. Those building dreams to move to new heights in Egbeda, who'll argue with their lives that they are better than those who are in Ipaja—after all they were bordering Ikeja. This city where I and my boys sing from one bus stop to another, handing out leaflets and posters for politicians who slap our hands with hope once they get into power.

"I carry this city on my head. I run this modafuka city!" I say, looking at her face. "How can I stop the were?"

Pamela smiles. She places her hands over my shoulder and pats me on the shoulder, "First, there's something you should know."

She lets out the secret: The city has been taken over by *kokoro ajenirun*. Flesh-eating ants, cankerworms, caterpillars, and palmer-worms that only desire to eat the city to the ground.

Rubbish talk, *abi*? Still, it is what it is. There's a part of us that feels it each time we walk around the city. It's like something is about to spit us out of its mouth because it is suffering from the pain of abscess from sores caused by those flesh-eaters. I mean, we hear the noise every night. A writhing silenced before morning, because the city has also forgotten how to scream so we can notice that it is not what we used to know. The Lagos of those black and white pictures.

The city loses a limb, and we don't even notice because we are consumed by the look of shiny steel legs, bridging the trunk to the rest of the body. The mainland and the island think they are different, but they have something in common—both are decaying.

Those who are not from here always notice all of these things at once; those *abroadian*—with their noses up, like they are better than everyone else—and those ones from villages, who always talk about wanting to hurry back to where they are from. I mean, like the artificial look, metallic noses to cover the broken one. It's easy to get so used to these things, the smell from a body decaying away under the weight of plastic bags and feces. Bodies are sticking together from sweats because the city is wrapped in shitty concrete, nothing like trees. How can a body breathe under so much concrete weight?

If what Pamela is says is to be believed, we may not have a city but a place where organisms without thought or brain live. These flesh-eaters are moving from the city to the people in it, and they will start with the brain. What do you call a land with people without brain?

There's no way to think of a city where I am not in charge. How do I run a city eaten to the ground?

Pamela takes me to her hotel. Eko Hotel & Suites. It's the first time I am inside. I came once when a politician asked us to meet his campaign train here so we can go to Lekki to cause trouble and make people vote for us by force of fire. I remove my shirt because I know why she wants me here. Why else does a woman—a senior woman—ask a young man to like me to follow her to the hotel. She looks at me and smiles, and then walks towards the window, and the gentlest yet chilliest voice I have heard in my life, she says, "Wear your shirt, now. You're here to change things and not be an idiot." I still hear the voice in my head.

It's the first time she uses that kind of tone with me. I gather myself and get ready for whatever reason she brought me to the room, which is certainly not the reason I thought. She is also not looking like she's interested in my football career. She is interested in nothing I know except for this city of flesh-eaters I alone can control or take over. She is talking about how the small acts of not caring about others is ruining our city and that it will soon exist as a wreckage. She says no one will come here again and the seas will be filled with shit and plastic and surface run-off and take-away containers and cigarettes. I feel guilty because I am beginning to see that she's talking about me. But Pamela has a way of helping me see things by letting me know how I am also involved. After all, as an Area Boy, the first thing I do before fighting in a mob is shatter the bottle on my head before approaching my rival. To make anyone feel your crazy you need to show them a level of craze. You know, you know now. That's how we roll.

"Crazy boy," Pamela says, with a smile flushing off the seriousness that took over her face earlier. "Floating stilts on the third mainland bridge, clusters of corrugated huts tucked in the blind spots of the city dreamy houses on Banana Island, Ikoyi, and the reserved areas in Ikoyi. You belong everywhere."

"I am an Area Boy. I belong to the streets I control. I ask my boys to control the street and they know what to do."

"Maybe you'd know how to control the flesh-eaters too," she says and this time she is not smiling.

"Seriously, I am not the person for this kind of job. Look at me. I don't have anything, no house of my own, nothing—even my parents had to die early because ... maybe they could tell I'd amount to nothing."

She is nodding in that way when someone just wants you to keep babbling and this time I feel like I am going mad. I mean like crazy.

I stand up and pick up the TV remote like I am going to do something with it, but only stroke it for some time and then I place it back on the table.

"Sleep. I'll be back."

I watch her leave. I don't fall asleep. I know I won't sleep till she returns. I walk towards the window, part the curtain, and look outside. I feel like I am sleeping and dreaming, but I know what I am seeing is real. Everywhere outside is dark, and I mean heavy dark. The type where you see nothing, but you own inside thoughts, which is not possible. So, what I mean is dead dark. I can hear the growling and munching. Something, something is snacking away. I am stunned. I can't even put down the hands holding the curtain.

It's there because you don't want to see it, Pamela has explained. You do not think that your personal pain is also a consequence of those who eat the fortune created for your future, and that of your likes? The city becomes handicapped, and your world is buried, she says. The flesh-eaters won't stop until you show that you know what's happening and grab it before it owns the land. She says, London, Columbia, Mogadishu—ever heard of these places? Or long ago, Chicago was being swallowed whole. This was in the 1920s or so by flesh-eater who make the city disappear, and it still holds the number one position.

My body cringes just thinking about how the flesh falls off the city and it is helpless, hopeless and broken. I can hear the growl of the eater heading in my direction. There's no doubt, it can tell that someone is aware, and it'll try to kick back anyway. Kickbacks is how they have survived all these times anyway. *Modafucka oshi!* Grrrrrr. I look closer and see that the flesh-eater is not even a bacterium. I see a person—not man or woman. This thing is a monster, and I don't know how in the world I am meant to tackle it.

Pamela walks back into the room and I see the flesh-eater retreat. I had been asleep and must have been dreaming. The dream was so real. It was almost seeming like it'll come in through the window, and I do not know if I was ready, but I can tell I will defend my city because my city is also me. Pamela leaves me in the room and heads for the bathroom and that is when I notice she is covered in mud and something as red as blood. I try to talk to her, but she waves me off with her hand, indicating I should say nothing. I still go on to say I'll be on my way now. Since she's in the bathroom, it means I can't wash. So I linger for a while. I know she always gives me something for the road. She remembers. "Open the first drawer in the bedside table. Take the bundle of cash. You'll need to get yourself together to keep the flesh-eaters from eating us to the ground. See you later today," she says.

Underbridges are a good hiding place. It is the only place that's not a house but feels like home. No one cares where you are from if you play by the rules. You know the ones who control the streets, you wait your turn, you don't steal and if you do, don't get caught. Obalende Bridge is the first place I stop after I leave the hotel. It is no longer grey outside, and I sit with the Area Boys and ask for where to get a smoke, one *eja* for the road. I signal to a woman selling rice to give me a plate with two meats and some *dodo*. She brings it. I return to the boys, paying attention to what they are saying as I smoke quietly. I am investigating—the way Pamela says I should. The boys talk about those borrowing their teeth to eat up the city, they talk about how their mouths bleed at night, how they have no one to turn to. I am quiet, but I am paying attention to them.

The sun is blazing when I leave. Obalende is crowded. People are moving in a hurry and everywhere looks like an ant invasion. I see two men in their camouflage standing at the bus stop. They are carrying guns like a way to send a reminder that an army barracks is around the corner. The governorship election is close. I quicken my steps.

The moment my stomach is full my head lets in every sound, and I am thinking about Pamela again. I wonder how much money she is willing to give me to "get myself together." How does one even do that when so many things are broken? Can I wake my parents from the dead and tell them not to leave their property with a greedy uncle whose only concern was for me to be invisible and unseen the rest of my life. The thoughts in my head have clouded my eyes and I am not paying attention to the streets. I am just walking like someone that has *jogodo* after taking too many smokes. I find myself in a shiver. I don't have to look because I know what is there before me. It's the same thing I saw in Pamela's room, but this time I am not afraid, and I am paying attention.

The sun is biting my nape and I imagine what it'd mean for the city to constantly have people biting into its flesh. People are walking around in Obalende like they don't know that their lives is slowly leaving them. The man-eater thing that is also a person that is eating the city is not alone. I see like three, no four, no five, no six ... I lose count. They are not people, but they are moving in the crowd. Sometimes, they plaster themselves on the wall and passers-by will smile at them and say things, like "That's the person I'll vote for."

I move through the crowd and I elbow those who are trying to keep me from getting to the bus. I am trying to find my way from the man-eater thing, trying to get me in its grasp. The police and soldiers are standing, and I feel like they can see what I see and know what I know. They are acting like they have no care in the world. Again, I believe what I believe. They can't be trusted for anything.

I find my way to a bus going to Oshodi. I silently hope the bus will start moving, because I can see that the man-eaters are really after me. I think they know what I am up to, there's something I also noticed that I didn't take note of before—they also shapeshift.

For the first time, it hits me that I am about to lose the city. I am trying to remember if there's something that Pamela told me that I forgot about these things—bloody man-eaters. There's a woman in a human hair wig blocking my way. She eyes me like I'm shit, because she sees I'm wearing my *Agbero* T-shirt, with "National" boldly written on it.

The bus stops and I get down. I head towards the Oshodi underbridge, it's going to be my safest place. Before I get there, I notice the boys are acting strangely. No one needs to tell me; they are under the captive of the man-eater. The police, the soldiers, everyone appears to be bitten. I see the bridge in a way I have never seen it before. Crumbling, broken steel bars sticking out like a spear ready to puncture the sides of an enemy. I don't know how to reach Pamela; there's so much I know and don't know at the same time.

Street traders are everywhere. Bloody greedy goat descendants. They fill the sidewalk, hawk between vehicles stuck in traffic, hang around in the open market, block my path. I know that they are all about who can protect them, and with the way the boys seem to have switched, I appear to have become the enemy. I see one of them point out to me. She recognizes me despite my attempt to disguise. The boys—who only a few days earlier were loyal to me—are attentive to the woman, and I squeeze my way in and out of the crowd. I need somewhere to go to and clear my head. How did I end up a fugitive in my place of refuge? I am trying to remember if Pamela told me that my friend will also become my enemies in this attempt to save the city from maneaters.

I run-walk from Oshodi to Mushin. It is not much of a distance, because this is a regular walk during fuel scarcity. But today, it is different. I am weak, and my bones feel like wood, and this is all new to me even though I play football regularly in the evenings.

I walk past Mushin and head towards Ojuelegba. I feel the heat of the sun earlier in the day on me even though it is now evening; I feel like my boys are also after me. The sky is not enough cover and I do not know where to hide. In Ojuelegba, at the intersection, in the direction of Ayílárá street. The girls in the red-light district may be of help to me. They are hunted all the time; they'll know how to protect a man like me. The flesh-eater is spreading rapidly, and the land is shaking under my feet. The flesh is not able to take the pain again. I tiptoe gently out of the hiding spot and look at the faces of passers-by. They are in pain, but they do not even know it yet. I wonder if the flesh-eating disease has now started eating brains as well. If it gets worse, the survival of the city will be impossible.

I walk hurriedly into Ayílárá street, and when I get to the junction that leads into Apena, I see one of my boys walking towards me looking like he's living but also dead. Like those Zombie movies we

watch on television. What is this? This isn't what I signed up for when Pamela was talking about saving and protecting the city. I mean, I own this city, but this is a monster taking over the people, mostly young boys and girls, considering the way Ayílará girls stared me down. They look ready to devour me. They have the bacteria; it has taken their shape, and they won't accept me until I give them something in return. What can one give to what is ready to eat you?

I have to do what I have to do.

I move into houses—in and out to escape the horror after me. Each time I think I have a place to hide, it wears the shape of those I seek help from. I am not safe. Everything which was hidden has now shape-shifted into the bacterial and I can see the decaying flesh in the form it takes in the city.

Rows of dilapidated buildings that look abandoned but are filled to the brim with destitute people. Crumbling factories defaced with posters advertising products people don't buy and some asking for those who will vote for one candidate or another. Broken open drainage, parks with broken benches and with heaps of refuse dumped in the middle. One or two have flowers and right when you sit down you catch the smell of feces dumped right in the middle.

I fall down on the group, breathing hard because I can feel like I am being smothered with a crowd rushing out of the city. They are heading for the borders they want to leave. I find the last strength in me to think. Think of the future I could have as a future, think of how the city belongs to me and what I need to do to keep it. I am flailing my hands, the bacteria is possessing the buildings, the people, eating, chomping hard—I can see its teeth now. I feel myself harden like concrete and I stretch far up like I am reaching up to the sky. My hand touches the sky—unbelievable! It touches the sky. I return filled with new energy and scream: I run this cittttty.

The flesh-eater retreats. I don't see it, but I see the things it possessed get back to their normal shapes. The frowns on the faces are not so automated, they look real and full.

It's over. I can't believe it. It is over.

I collapse on the ground and weep. No tears come from me. But I am shaking like a leaf in the wind. My body feels like a broken pile of cement blocks. I pick up myself and look around. The world doesn't know what just happened.

I am back in Ojuelegba, the people are going in top speed doing their normal business, running after Danfo buses and the street traders and the election posters are there, but now with fewer promises.

Pamela knew something but she didn't tell me what I was to expect in full. The flesh-eater is still there, they want to eat the city to the ground, but I own this city. I run this city.

I do not know what tomorrow will bring, but if what I see is real, I'll be fighting for a long time. I am building an army—first I'll get my boys and then you ...

Jùmòkè Verissimo's most recent book is the novel, *A Small Silence*. She teaches at Toronto Metropolitan University.